

Christmas Eve-December 24th, 2020
Baltic and East Nidaros Lutheran Parish
Luke 2:1-20

“More Than a Sign” Sermon by Pastor Randall J. Questad

*Grace and peace to you from God our Father and his Son Jesus Christ born in Bethlehem to be a Savior for you.
Amen*

The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Apparently, the shepherds that visited the Christ child were not much different than you and I are today. It can be hard to simply be told something and believe that it is true. We are skeptical of what some people tell us. We want to see some proof. After all, as the saying goes, “Seeing is believing”. And this saying must be true since it was first spoken by a 17th century English preacher, Thomas Fuller. His complete quote has been shortened over time. Fuller's complete quote was “Seeing is believing, but feeling is the truth.”

According to this 17th Century clergyman, it not only takes hearing and seeing to believe as the shepherds had experienced, but Fuller adds, before you believe you better touch it to see if it is real. Fuller adds the sense of touch, but he completely dismisses that the sense of hearing has anything to do with believing. Doubting Thomas is an example of a person in scripture that required all three senses before he would believe. An Easter morning, the other disciples told Thomas that they had seen the risen Lord. But he said that he would not believe what he had heard unless he saw the risen Christ for himself and placed his own fingers in the mark of the nails. Thomas needed more than words. He demanded to also have a sign.

Throughout scripture there are examples of people who come close to believing after hearing, but then want something more. Some want to see a sign. When the angel appeared to the shepherds on the night when Jesus was born, they were first struck with terror. The angel attempted to calm their fears by speaking to them when the angel said, “Do not be afraid; for see--I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people; to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.”

None of these shepherds verbally demanded a sign like Doubting Thomas. They did not say they wouldn't believe unless they saw for themselves or held the baby in their own arms before they would believe. But the angel must have seen the signs of disbelief on the faces of the shepherds when they heard the good news which the angel announced was for them. When messengers of God bring good news to people, they will do whatever is necessary to replace fear and unbelief with faith. So, the angel spoke again and gave them a sign. The shepherds would go and see the child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger. But before the shepherds saw this sign, they received still another sign more brilliant than the Christmas star that was in the sky on Monday night. This star could not be missed. The angel that first appeared was now joined by a large choir of other angels that came down from heaven and this multitude of angels began to sing about what the first angel had first spoken. This choir of angels sang that this child would deliver peace on earth to those he favors.

As the choir of angels left them, the shepherds who had been diligent in watching their sheep that night, left their flocks and went to Bethlehem to see this thing that had taken place. I have heard these words every year at Christmas, but I remember how they hit me last year when I read them for this service. The shepherds went to see "this thing." The angel that first appeared to these shepherds announced the birth of the Savior, the Messiah, the Lord. Not a thing. The angel said this child would bring good news, peace on earth, and his favor. I wondered if angels heard the shepherds call the Christ child a thing and passed what they heard to Luke and he recorded it in scripture that way. Or was this the best description for the Savior of the world these uneducated shepherds could come up with? Or I wondered if those who translated the bible from Greek couldn't find a good English word for what was first recorded in Greek and just called what the shepherds went to see a "thing".

I learned that "thing" was translated from the Greek word rhema. Rhema means an action of utterance, to be moved into speaking. Thing is the right word for the sign they saw lying in the manger. When the shepherds saw this thing, they could not keep it to themselves. The shepherds who had seen and had heard all that the angels had told them, now became preachers and they shared this good news with everyone.

We have been gathered tonight by the Holy Spirit to again see and hear signs of Christmas. As we again heard the Christmas story, we have seen angels. We have imagined in our minds what the glory of the Lord that caused the shepherds to be afraid must have looked like. We have imagined what it must sound like to have a choir of heavenly angels sing the hymns that we sing tonight. We remember Christmas programs from the past, family members who played the roles of Joseph, Mary, shepherds, angels, or even Jesus. All of these precious memories are signs of Christmas.

Tonight, these signs all point to more. They point to Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ who was born this night who IS your Savior. Jesus Christ who favors you. Now we, like the shepherds that first Christmas night after seeing this thing and hearing this good news will leave this place and proclaim this good news to others. Amen.